

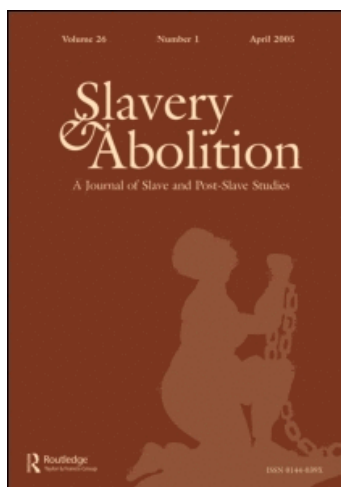
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## Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society

VINCENT BROWN

In his 1801 history of the British West Indies, the Jamaican planter and slave owner Bryan Edwards admitted that, 'In countries where slavery is established, the leading principle on which the government is supported is fear: or a sense of that absolute coercive necessity which, leaving no choice of action, supersedes all questions of right.'<sup>1</sup> Yet slave masters did not achieve the fear requisite to maintaining control over the enslaved by physical force alone. They did, in fact, assert their right to rule, and they did so by trying to terrorize the spiritual imaginations of the enslaved. To do so, slave masters projected their authority symbolically through spectacular punishments committed upon the bodies of the dead. As anthropologist Katherine Verdery has noted, dead bodies carry great symbolic weight: 'they evoke awe, uncertainty, and fear associated with "cosmic" concerns, such as the meaning of life and death'. Moreover, when managed with political intent, 'their corporeality makes them important means of *localizing* a claim'.<sup>2</sup> Employing dead bodies for symbols, masters marked territory with awesome icons of their power.

The use of spectacular terror to capture the imaginations of the enslaved remained a staple feature of social control in slave society. Yet even more menacingly, managers and overseers extended the spectacular to the magical, as they tried to harness the affective power of the dead and awe of the afterlife to their material authority. Though the intent was to dominate the imagination, the routinization of terrifying spectacles only aided the creation of new knowledges – novel understandings of the relationship between dead bodies, haunting spirits and political authority – that could also enhance the sacred authority of those opposed to serving the plantocracy as slaves, and who were willing to rise up and strike their masters. For their part, the enslaved established competing discourses of authority by invoking the spirits of the dead, and by selectively appropriating the material and spiritual power of the masters for their own

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purposes.<sup>3</sup> Both classes tried to elevate their authority by connecting it to the transcendent. In other words, they attached worldly power to otherworldly concerns.

Overseers and plantation managers faced a persistent threat of dispossession from African suicides. The harshness of the labour regime, social isolation and diminished status, and the longing to return to ancestral lands prompted many 'new negros' to seek self destruction. Henry Coor, who worked for 15 years as a millwright in Westmoreland, observed that unbearable workloads, physical punishment and incessant hunger prompted many Africans to cut their own throats or hang themselves. 'I remember fourteen Slaves', he told a House of Commons committee in England, 'that it was generally said, and I believe it was, from bad treatment, that them rise in rebellion on a Sunday, who ran away into the woods, and all cut their own throats together'.<sup>4</sup> For some, harsh treatment only aggravated the general indignity of lost social status. One plantation doctor who served in Jamaica from 1755 to 1765 told the same committee of an African 'man of consequence' who reportedly refused to work for any white man. Even after being punished by his overseer, the African bid the overseer to tell his owner that 'he would be a slave to no man'. Fearing that he was in possession of an incorrigible rebel the owner ordered him removed to another plantation. 'His hands were tied behind him; in going over a bridge, he jumped headlong into the water, and appeared no more.' Less esteemed Africans still faced the kind of disorienting social isolation that could lead to unrecoverable depression. The same doctor once held a boy who 'detested the idea of slavery so much that he refused all support, which brought on a dropsy, and terminated in his death'.<sup>5</sup> New African immigrants were known to kill themselves more often than seasoned slaves and Creoles committed suicide only on rare occasions. Commenting on higher death rates for newly arrived men than for women, former overseer William Fitzmaurice testified that entering into relationships and being taken as domestic servants afforded women social roles and protections unavailable to men. Consequently, he surmised, men were more depressive and committed suicide more often. New negros 'constantly told me', he said, 'that they preferred dying to living'.<sup>6</sup>

If so many Africans were sanguine about suicide, it was probably because Africans believed they would return home to their ancestral lands after death, and there be reunited with lost kin and friends as spirits and ancestors.<sup>7</sup> Mark Cook, a clerk, schoolmaster and small planter knew of several men and women, all Africans, who had hanged or shot themselves. Claiming to be acquainted with African funerals, he recognized that they made 'great rejoicings on those occasions, because, as I have understood from them, they thought their countrymen were gone back to their own

country again'.<sup>8</sup> When Lt. Baker Davidson of the 79th Regiment testified before the House of Commons, they asked him if he knew of any instances of Africans 'expressing themselves with affection of their native country, and desiring to return to it'.<sup>9</sup>

'I did,' Davidson replied, 'as I brought a Guinea woman to England who wished much to be sent back to her own country; and it is very common for Negroes when they are sick to say, they are going back to their own country.'

'Do they say it with apparent satisfaction?' the committee asked.

'They certainly do, as they express always a great deal of pleasure when they think they are going to die, and say that they are going to leave this Buccra country.'<sup>10</sup>

Caribbean slave masters used spectacular terror to deter Africans from self-destruction. At least as early as the mid-seventeenth century, British West Indian planters hoped that mutilating the dead would impress Africans not only with their power over life, but with their influence on the afterlife. Richard Ligon, chronicler of slave society in seventeenth-century Barbados, lamented that Africans 'believe in a Resurrection, and that they shall go into their own Country again, and have their youth renewed. And lodging this opinion in their hearts, they make it an ordinary practice, upon any great fright, or threatening of their Masters, to hang themselves'. A planter acquaintance of Ligon's, Colonel Walrond, had in a short time lost three or four of his most valuable slaves to suicide. Fearing that they had set a costly example to others, Walrond ordered that one of their heads should be chopped off and fixed to a pole a dozen feet high. He marched all his slaves around the totem, commanding them to gaze at the severed head, and he asked them to acknowledge that this was indeed the head of one of the self-murderers. As they did, Walrond told them that 'they were in a main error, in thinking they went into their own Countreys, after they were dead; for, this man's head was here, as they all were witnesses of; and how was it possible, the body could go without a head'. As Ligon remembered it, the Africans were convinced by the 'sad, yet lively spectacle'. Apparently, they changed their convictions and no more hanged themselves.<sup>11</sup>

Walrond may have been spared similar losses, but Africans continued to kill themselves with distressing frequency in the Caribbean and slave owners kept resorting to grisly techniques of deterrence. In the late eighteenth-century Danish West Indies, C.G.A. Oldendorp reported that 'the head and hands of such suicides have been put in a cage on public display – a measure not without effective results'.<sup>12</sup> In pre-revolutionary St Domingue, slavers mutilated the body of the first 'Ibo' slave to die in a given shipment: they beheaded it, or sliced off its nose and pried out its eyes

to prevent losses among other captives from the Bight of Biafra, who were widely reputed to be suicide-prone.<sup>13</sup> Cuban merchants and masters in the early nineteenth century incinerated corpses to achieve similar objectives with other groups of Africans.<sup>14</sup>

In Jamaica, such practices were widespread throughout the eighteenth century. Just before mid-century, an anonymous Jamaican planter wrote that to prevent Africans from believing that they could escape the island in death their bodies were 'often hanged up' by their masters to show the living that the dead remained in Jamaica.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps around mid-century masters began to apply the punishments for outright rebellion – burning the body down to ash – to suicide as well. And, to dramatize the impossibility of freedom in death, they threatened to deny them their final rite of passage. In 1751 the Anglican rector of Westmoreland wrote to his bishop that 'to deprive them of their funeral Rites by burning their dead Bodies, seems to Negroes a greater Punishment than Death itself. This is done to Self-Murderers'.<sup>16</sup> As late as the final decade of slavery, John Stewart could remember a time when newly arriving Africans committed suicide in order to 'return to their native country, and enjoy the society of kindred and friends, from whom they have been torn away in an evil hour'.<sup>17</sup> He also remembered the 'dismal and disgusting spectacle' of their heads adorning poles along public roads, and their bodies 'sometimes consumed by fire'.

Whether, in fact, such mutilations were an effective deterrent is open to question. Dismemberment certainly represented a compelling metaphysical threat to English Protestants, but there is little or no direct evidence that Africans believed that losing their head or a limb would prevent their return to ancestral lands.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in parts of West Africa, slaves were routinely beheaded upon the death of nobles so that they could continue to serve their masters in the spiritual world.<sup>19</sup> European masters, on the other hand, beheaded and dismembered slaves to make them serve, symbolically, in the material world. Through dead bodies they attempted to seize and manipulate African visions of the afterlife in an effort to govern the worldly actions of the living.

Mutilating the bodies of Africans who committed suicide was only part of a broader agenda that used ritual execution to give governing authority a sacred, even supernatural dimension. Spectacular executions attached worldly authority to transcendent concerns and allowed the plantocracy's power to reach into the spiritual imaginations of slaves. As with the punishments for suicide, the punishments for rebellion were meant to inspire in the enslaved spiritual terror by visiting extraordinary torments on their bodies before and after death. From at least the late seventeenth century, the bodies of slave rebels were burned alive. Sir Hans Sloane, who visited Jamaica just before the turn of the century, described the grisly

tortures meted out to slaves and the meticulous method of executing rebels, 'by nailing them down on the ground with crooked Sticks on every Limb, and then applying the Fire by degrees from the Feet and Hands, burning them gradually up to the Head, whereby their pains are extravagant'.<sup>20</sup> Only two weeks after Thomas Thistlewood arrived in Savanna la Mar in 1750, he watched his host William Dorrill order the body of a dead runaway dug up and beheaded, the head to be fixed on a pole and the body to be incinerated.<sup>21</sup> Just months later Thistlewood 'saw a Negro fellow nam'd English belonging to Fuller Wood Tried, lost, and hang'd upon ye 1st Tree immediately (for drawing his knife upon a White Man), his head Cutt off, Body left unbury'd'.<sup>22</sup> Once he assumed an overseer's post on the Egypt sugar plantation, Thistlewood himself had the opportunity to use the dead to enhance his authority. In October 1752 he was pleased to receive a letter, two returning fugitives and 'also Robin's head, who was hanged yesterday for running away with those two boys'. As a warning to others he 'put it upon a pole and stuck it up just at the angle of the road in the home pasture'.<sup>23</sup>

Lady Maria Nugent passed just such a fetish on her way to church one day in 1803. She protested to her diary that if her party had not already promised their attendance to the clergyman at Kingston, 'I would not have gone, for we were obliged to pass close by the pole, on which was stuck the head of a black man who was executed a few days ago'.<sup>24</sup> Placing the bodies of the condemned along well travelled paths served to haunt those places with memories and narratives of crime and punishment. Once, Matthew Gregory Lewis was inspired to ask 'to whom a skull had belonged, which I had observed fixed on a pole by the roadside, when returning last from Montego Bay'. As it turned out the totem had been there for five years, since about 1811. Then 'a Mr. Dunbar had given some discontent to his negroes in the article of clothing them ... this was sufficient to induce his head driver, who had been brought up in his own house from infancy, to form a plot among his slaves to assassinate him'.<sup>25</sup> The recycling of these kinds of stories re-introduced past evidence of white power to the present and fastened it to particular places through the bodies of the dead.<sup>26</sup> At times the colonial state even tried to convert the oppositional discourses of the enslaved into such narratives of plantocratic power. Authorities hanged Eboe Dick in 1816 for 'making use of singing, propagating and disseminating seditious and rebellious words, songs, and expressions'.<sup>27</sup> When they placed his head on 'the most public place at Lindhurst' plantation, they hoped to make him sing a different song.

As nearly everyone remarked, such ghoulish displays served clear purposes. They used dead bodies, dismembered and disfigured as they were, as symbols of the power and propriety of slave masters. Severed heads

stood sentry over the plantation landscape, watching passers-by, white, black and brown, conveying warnings to potential rebels and assurance to supporters of the social order. Such symbols were thought to be effective because they were affective: they harnessed the other-worldly and the sacred to specific bodies, places and narratives, and those to the social power of the rulers.<sup>28</sup> These conventions were largely inherited from the British theatre of social control but the Jamaican plantocracy had to re-stage several elements of the exhibition.

Exaggerated tortures and post-mortem humiliations were staple punishments in early modern Europe and England. As in Jamaica, they served to graft sacred and social power onto the bodies of condemned criminals.<sup>29</sup> Disfigurement and scorching gave criminals a foretaste of the punishments their souls would receive in Hell. The wrath of God in man was thus brought to bear on enemies of the state. Dismembering and scattering corpses, or exposing them to be 'consumed by the air and the birds of the sky', protected living communities from the evil that criminal spirits might continue to work in the world. Incineration of their corpses effected the complete physical and metaphysical eradication of the criminal's presence.<sup>30</sup> Preventing decent burials arrested the spirit's passage into the other world and desecrated the memory of the dead by fixing the attention of the living upon the rotting body. Throughout Europe the public exposure of bodies at places of execution and at well-travelled intersections 'formed part of a dual system which maximized display ... The executions themselves were primarily meant as an example to the inhabitants. Exposure of corpses along the roads was a special warning directed at non-residents coming in'.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century English road books and guides often mentioned gallows and gibbets as road marks.<sup>32</sup>

The fear and submission evoked by such measures depended, in part, on shared understandings between the rulers and the ruled. To a degree, the populace and the people who managed them shared religious idioms for thinking about death and the afterlife, though they surely interpreted them differently, in accordance with their experience of material life and status hierarchies. Also, they commonly understood the sacred dimensions of courtroom protocol and public execution.

Assize judges, who descended upon the eighteenth-century English countryside twice a year, carefully scripted their rhetoric to connote godly paternalism as well as the power and passion of righteous vengeance in order to legitimize the rule of law.<sup>33</sup> When the time came to pronounce a death sentence, 'the powers of light and darkness were summoned into the court with the black cap which was donned to pronounce sentence of death, and the spotless white gloves worn at the end of a "maiden assize" when no

prisoners were left for execution'.<sup>34</sup> Most importantly, judges were often 'likened to God, deriving their authority from divine authority'.<sup>35</sup> A death sentence then, was a supernatural judgement, merely mediated by the state. At the place of execution, dramatic pageants of sin, redemption and damnation organized scaffold rituals around shared signs. The widespread sale of 'last dying speeches and confessions' pamphlets created common idioms and expectations for the drama of the executions.<sup>36</sup> Recurring forms and ceremonies drawn from religious narratives and regional experiences played to 'generations highly literate in emblematic meaning'.<sup>37</sup> The gallows itself stood as a symbol that a given place was a 'city of law' and heralded the majesty of the authorities that enforced it.<sup>38</sup>

Symbolic authority was enhanced by judicial mercy and personal patronage. Judges wielded broad discretion in waiving death sentences. The intervention of well-heeled and influential men often saved the lives of convicted felons. The effect was to force those under threat of execution (disproportionately poor, labouring folks) to seek protection from the propertied elite who generally controlled the legal institutions in the first place.<sup>39</sup> In short, to enhance their power, authorities drew upon common discourses about legal ritual, symbolic authority and death produced by local histories of personal and cultural interaction.

Such common discourses were scarcer in Jamaica. Africans and their descendants, schooled to understand very different and disparate emblems of sacred power, replaced the 'visually literate audience', educated in the sacred signs of English legal authority.<sup>40</sup> One can only assume that similar rites of terror read quite differently to a Jamaican audience. In Douglas Hay's conception, 'Justice, Terror and Mercy', managed with delicacy and circumspection, tutored people to respect the authority of the elite in England.<sup>41</sup> The Jamaican plantocracy, which initially shared few cultural idioms with slaves, perhaps none with Africans, ruled largely through magisterial terror. For though they drew upon cultural resources from England, they had to adapt them to the Jamaican situation.

Unlike the English common folk, Africans and their children were cultural outsiders. When Edward Long evaluated Jamaican slave laws in 1774, he opined that 'The Africans, first imported, were wild and savage in the extreme'. In this he only echoed the language of the 1661 Barbados slave code which condemned 'negroes' as a 'heathenish, brutish and an Uncertain dangerous Kinde of people', who could not be adequately governed by English law.<sup>42</sup> Lawmakers in Jamaica had drawn on the legal experience of both British and Barbadians early in the life of the colony and by mid-century had adapted their slave codes to local conditions, chief among them the persistent threat of open rebellion.<sup>43</sup> The legal system was in place but a belief system was not.

Rapid demographic turnover in the sugar islands meant that the implementers of social order could never count on people knowing or internalizing the rules. Moreover the meanest enforcers of plantation discipline, the 'petty whites', shifted about constantly, from plantation to plantation, from colony to colony, and from life to death. 'New-come buckra' regularly confronted 'new negroes' of diverse origins. Jamaica was perpetually threatened by a fluctuating and restless enslaved population. As Long put it, 'their intractable and ferocious tempers naturally provoked their masters to rule them with a rod of iron'.<sup>44</sup> Their masters also struggled to conjure an effective symbolic discourse to legitimate their rule, a discourse based on quite different principles and practices than those operating in England.

In 1664 the Jamaican Assembly established parallel courts specifically for the trial and sentencing of slaves. In her study of the slave courts in Saint Andrew's parish (from 1746 to 1782), Diana Paton convincingly argues that judicial practice in Jamaica 'emphasized the difference between slave and free, and valorized the slaveholder's private power', rather than 'representing the supposed common discipline of all to a single rule of law, as did the contemporary English spectacle of trial and punishment'.<sup>45</sup> Through most of the century slave crimes were tried before informal and irregularly scheduled tribunals composed of three freeholders and two magistrates – the magistrates were usually prominent planters.<sup>46</sup> Until 1788 there was no jury, and even after the law provided for nine-man juries (paid £2 by the parish vestries to attend), then 12-man juries in 1816, there was never any opportunity for appeal.<sup>47</sup> At any rate, there was no time because, as planter-author William Beckford remarked, 'a negro is often condemned in one hour, and receives execution in the next'.<sup>48</sup> Rather than trying to envelop slaves in the idea of a unitary system of justice, slave courts demonstrated to the enslaved that, for most intents and purposes, their masters and the law were one and the same.

It followed that the punishments decreed by the court were similar to those routinely meted out by slave owners. The slave courts ordered corporal punishments much more frequently than did courts in England. The whip, that enduring symbol of plantation authority, was used extensively by the slave court. Mutilation for non-capital crimes – the chopping of ears, noses, feet – continued long after such punishments were discontinued in Europe. For the capital crime of 'assault on white person' or 'rebellious conspiracy', post-mortem punishments were common. The frequency of mutilations and aggravated death sentences, reserved for traitors in eighteenth-century England, signalled the expansion and racialization of the very concept of treason. As Paton has recognized: 'Slaves constituted a group of people for whom almost any "crime" might

be defined as treachery because it could be interpreted as resistance to the social order of slavery.<sup>49</sup> It was ironic: a population that had fewer reasons to be loyal to the ruling elite than had English common folk were more regularly defined as traitorous. Slave codes and courts in Jamaica operated on behalf of a public that was narrowly viewed in terms of the collective interests of slave owners. Such 'justice' may have affirmed the legitimacy of the system to planters and merchants, but slaves were only supposed to be terrified.

The centerpiece of legal terror was exemplary punishment and execution. Yet, unlike the regular, carnivalesque dramas of state authority in England, Jamaican executions consisted of sporadic, localized demonstrations. Certainly, when groups of rebels were hanged or burned after failed uprisings there were crowds, but at most times, in most parts of the island, public executions were used more to dramatize the power of masters than to construct a community governed by just laws and punishments. After an uprising in Westmoreland in 1766, Thomas Thistlewood noted that '2 of the Rebel Negroes were tried yesterday and one of them burnt with a slow fire (alive) near the gallows at Savanna la Mar, yesterday evening; and the other, this morning at Cross-Path, where they killed Gardiner'.<sup>50</sup> Killing the second rebel at the very place where the white man had been slain was certainly an attempt to reclaim the place for white authority. Upon landing in St Ann's Bay in 1779, Captain Thomas Lloyd of the Royal Navy saw a man and a woman 'in irons, bound together, leading to trial, and attended by very few people'. He was told that they had been runaway slaves. At the time Lloyd was on his way to dinner at a plantation in the interior but, when he returned in the evening to his ship, the *Hercules Victualler*, he inquired about the couple. An officer from another ship in the harbour who had been ashore described the execution for him.

They were both executed on the wharf, in the sight of the ship's company ... and that the sister of the woman who was executed, bewailing her loss, the owner came to her, and said, Take of yourself, you B—, you see how your sister is served. Upon enquiring of some of the Planters, the man had been hanged for running away, and the woman for secreting him..<sup>51</sup>

In the late eighteenth century, constables or deputy marshals were paid to attend trials and carry out executions. In 1794, for example, the Saint Thomas in the Vale vestry paid deputy marshal George Coward £2 for the trial and £10 for the execution of Frank, a negro horse thief. Coward collected £1 12s, for 'the Hire of a Horse and Cart to convey Frank to his gallows at Bog Walk'. The vestry also reimbursed him £5 for providing a

party of light dragoons with refreshment. The soldiers had been ordered to attend the execution.<sup>52</sup> The dragoons provided security, but it also appears that they made up most of the audience, as did the sailors in St Ann who watched the execution of the enslaved couple. Perhaps the military officers and slave owners conspired not only to keep the enslaved in subjection, but also to warn the long-suffering rank and file not to challenge military hierarchy. After all, the West India garrison had an extraordinarily high mortality rate and, according to historian Roger Norman Buckley, 'were driven to misconduct by the danger of their new lives'. To control them, officers were encouraged to 'treat them all like slaves'.<sup>53</sup>

The enslaved were often tried, sentenced and executed in towns, but post-mortem punishments usually took place on the plantations where the slaves had committed crimes or hatched rebellions. Planters even preferred that the whole demonstration of authority occur locally. In 1731 landowners in the Carpenter's Mountains in St Elizabeth sent a petition to the Assembly requesting permission to set up a court nearby so that they would not have to travel the 'near forty miles to give an account of their white people, slaves, and cattle, in order to be assessed'. They also complained that the usual custom of trying slaves at Lacovia, at such an inconvenient distance, allowed many of them to escape 'just punishment'. They proposed that they be allowed to try slaves 'nearest the place where any facts are committed'.

The example of such a trial, and the punishment ordered by the justices and freeholders, in the neighborhood, must strike a greater terror in the other slaves than their bare hearing of its being acted at a distance, although, if condemned to death, the head may be ordered to be put up at the place where the fact was committed.<sup>54</sup>

The petitioners hoped to harness the whole ritual of judicial majesty to local authority, thereby making their private land synonymous with public power. Whether they got their way is unknown. A century later, it seems clear that while slave trials took place in towns, the executions had been relocated to countryside crime scenes. In the wake of the 1831 Baptist War, Methodist ministers Thomas Murray and Henry Bleby watched as 13 convicted rebels were taken from Lucea into the country for execution.<sup>55</sup> In any case, the Carpenter's Mountain planters already possessed the ability to deploy what was perhaps their most dreaded token of authority: the relics that haunted space.

Diana Paton has illuminated the 'detailed and finely calibrated language' of the sentences involving mutilation in the St Andrew slave court records. Not only was the court specific about which body parts would be removed at what time from each individual criminal, it often ordered that the severed pieces, especially *ears*, be nailed to places of significance. For

instance, 'removed ears were to be nailed, variously, to the gallows and the cotton tree, to the gate at the watch hut, and on one occasion to "the tree against the mill house on the Barbican estate"'.<sup>56</sup> In explaining the 'symbolics of mutilation' employed by Jamaican authorities, Paton suggests that they tried to extend to Afro-Jamaicans the meanings of such punishments that had obtained in Great Britain a century earlier. They also innovated. The court often ordered lashings to occur beneath large silk cotton trees and body parts to be nailed to them. Blacks in Jamaica reportedly believed that the spirits of the dead dwelt in and around such trees, sometimes by choice, but more often because they had been caught and trapped by magical means. As Paton notes, 'the belief in the symbolic importance of the cotton tree was something that Jamaican whites were aware of, tried to manipulate, [and] to some extent adopted'.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, at Half Way Tree in St Andrew, the old cotton tree that gave the spot its name lived adjacent to a well-populated graveyard for whites. The relics nailed to the tree would have been highly evocative to spectators. The evidence that the slave courts intended to domesticate the dead is more suggestive than demonstrative, yet the rituals of sentencing and punishment themselves, taking place as they did in quick and irregularly scheduled trials and before modest audiences, were no doubt less awesome to the enslaved than the lingering presence of relics and mutilated corpses.

Consider again Mr Dunbar's head driver, who, Matthew Lewis learned, was above suspicion until investigators searched his house. There, they found not only Dunbar's watch, 'but with it one of his ears, which the villain had carried away, from a negro belief that, as long as the murderer possesses one of the ears of his victim, he will never be haunted by his spectre'.<sup>58</sup> Clearly, the spiritual power of the planter class was more impressive than its law.

The way that Africans and their descendants harnessed the dead to their own political authority was not fully apparent to the plantocracy until after Tacky's rebellion in 1760. Africans brought magical talismans and medicines with them when they crossed the Atlantic and they tried to use them against their captors. Cruising off the Windward coast of Africa in 1751 aboard the *Duke of Argyle*, Captain John Newton discovered that nearly 20 of the captured Africans below decks had broken their chains.<sup>59</sup> The slavers had just averted a rebellion, but days later the Africans tried another tactic. 'In the afternoon we were alarmed with a report that some of the men slaves had found means to poyson the water in the scuttle casks upon deck', Newton recorded in his journal, 'but upon enquiry found they had only conveyed some of their country fetishes, as they call them, or talismans into one of them, which they had the credulity to suppose must inevitably kill all who drank of it'. Relieved, Newton nervously

congratulated himself on his own 'superior' spirituality: 'if it please God they make no worse attempts than to charm us to death, they will not much harm us, but it shews their intentions are not wanting'.<sup>60</sup> Earlier in the century, some Englishmen showed a greater concern about the efficacy of African spiritual power. Thomas Walduck, an army officer stationed at Barbados in the early 1700s wrote that 'white men, overseers of plantations and masters have been forced to leave this island by being bewitched by the Negroes'.<sup>61</sup> Yet most Jamaican planters seemed as unconcerned as Newton.

Whites in Jamaica often made casual reference to the magical practices of the enslaved in their diaries and published accounts. Before 1760 they considered them a generally harmless and bizarre feature of slave life, not unlike witchcraft and conjuring in Europe. In spring 1753 Thomas Thistlewood witnessed as Guy, from nearby Salt River plantation, 'acted his Obia, &c. with singing, dancing, &c. odd enough'.<sup>62</sup> Odd, but not serious. Early the next year, he noted with amusement that Jinney Quashe, a well-known obeah man, was 'pretending to pull bones, &c. out of several of our Negroes for which they was to give him money'. Somehow, Jinney Quashe's clients discovered that he was a fraud, and 'they chased him out of the estate, frightened enough'. The event reminded Thistlewood of a scene he had witnessed in Yorkshire when a noted conjurer from Wakefield, Black Lambert, was chased out of the town of Acworth.<sup>63</sup> Such innocent and innocuous comparisons ended a few years later when an island-wide slave conspiracy brought the alarming aspects of obeah to the forefront of planter concerns.

Obeah, or 'obia', was the catch-all term used to describe a complex of shamanistic magical practices derived from different parts of Africa, and conducted by ritual specialists working largely outside formal institutions.<sup>64</sup> Obeah practitioners operated as herbalists and wisefolk tending to physical, social and spiritual needs, though whites generally mis-characterized obeah as simple witchcraft, failing to see its larger role in social and spiritual healing and protection.<sup>65</sup> According to the most recent research on the provenance of obeah, the *term* probably originated among Igbo-speaking peoples taken to the West Indies from the Bight of Biafra.<sup>66</sup> There, obeah's closest semantic and phonological analogue, *dbia*, refers to an 'adept', or 'master' of knowledge and wisdom. So the anglophone Caribbean term 'obeah man' probably referred in a similar way to a 'master of knowledge and wisdom [in the sacred arts]'.<sup>67</sup> Through most of the eighteenth century, obeah was mastered almost exclusively by Africans. Nevertheless, one of the earliest reports on Jamaican obeah to the House of Commons claimed that

The Negroes in general, whether Africans or Creoles, revere, consult, and abhor them; to these Oracles they resort, and with the most implicit Faith, upon all Occasions, whether for the cure of Disorders,

the obtaining of Revenge for Injuries or Insults, the conciliating of Favour, the Discovery and Punishment of the Thief or the Adulterer, and the Prediction of Future Events.<sup>68</sup>

While the term may have come from the Igbo language, the practices described by the term combined elements from the sacred traditions and medical knowledge of Africans seized from several areas of the continent. For example, many obeah men in Jamaica were Africans from the Gold Coast. Moreover, the term 'obeah' also referred to the charms that carried spiritual power and could be placed strategically around the individual who was to be cursed or protected. These were made up of a variety of materials thought to have sacred significance, including blood, feathers, parrot's beaks, animal teeth, broken glass, eggshells and grave dirt.<sup>69</sup> The materials used in obeah evoke Robert Faris Thompson's description of the *nkisi* in West Central Africa.

The *nkisi* is believed to live with an inner life of its own. The basis of that life was a captured soul (either of an indestructible simbi spirit or some other kind of spirit). The owner of the charm could direct the spirit in the object to accomplish mystically certain things for him ... This miracle was achieved through the two basic classes of medicine within the charm, *spirit-embedding medicine* (earths, often from a grave site, for cemetery earth is considered at one with the spirit of the dead), and *spirit-admonishing objects* (seeds, claws, miniature knives, stones, crystals, and so forth).<sup>70</sup> [original emphases]

Capturing souls, or 'shadow catching', was one skill that obeah practitioners were thought to possess long after Africans stopped arriving on the island. In 1826, Alexander Barclay claimed to have been present at the trial of a 'notorious obeah-man, driver on an estate in the parish of St. David'. One of the witnesses against the driver was another man enslaved on the same plantation. When asked if indeed he knew the accused to be an obeah man, the witness replied, 'Ees, massa, shadow-catcher, true ... Him ha coffin, (a little coffin produced [by the witness]) him set for catch dem shadow.' The court asked for further clarification and the witness complied: 'When him set obeah for [somebody], him catch dem shadow and dem go dead.'<sup>71</sup>

The similarities between the shadow-catching obeah man and the practices described by Thompson are striking, but do not point to the conclusion that obeah was a 'Kongo' rather than an 'Igbo' practice. Note that Oldendorp recorded in the 1770s that it was 'the Amina', from the Gold Coast, who used the same term for 'soul' as for 'shadow'.<sup>72</sup> Clearly, the practices described under the term obeah changed with the arrival of new

groups of Africans. Early commentators maintained that only Africans practiced obeah but, by the time the legal slave-trade ended in 1807, enslaved persons of Creole birth had clearly taken up the practice.<sup>73</sup> There may never be detailed enough sources to track carefully the way that the Afro-Jamaican magical practices described by the term obeah responded to changes in immigration patterns and political-economic developments. However, it is probably safe to agree with Nigel Bolland that obeah took on a 'whole new meaning in the societies of the Caribbean, a meaning derived from the power structures, the social oppositions, in these societies'.<sup>74</sup>

We can say with confidence that in Jamaica, obeah was centrally concerned with spirits, with haunting and spiritual cure.<sup>75</sup> For example, in 1799 one Mr Graham, a free black man and a Christian, sought out an obeah man because 'his first Wife, who was dead, came into his ground and troubled him'. The obeah man prepared 'Guinea Pepper and red head Roots', which Graham was to put above his door in order to drive away the spirit of his former wife. Mr Graham paid the obeah man a rooster and a dollar for his services.<sup>76</sup> If obeah also often acted broadly as a counter-hegemonic practice and ideology, as the anthropologist Mindie Lazarus-Black maintains, it was most acute when dealing with the dead.<sup>77</sup> Rampant death made such a technology of the spirit critically important at all times, but as masters recruited dead bodies and parts of bodies to announce their own power, the political significance of obeah for the enslaved was most pronounced.

The enslaved used obeah to treat disease and manipulate human behaviour and the spirits of the dead, and also as a means of enhancing the political authority of ritual specialists and their patrons. In the 1770s Edward Long described obeah as 'a sort of witchcraft of most extensive influence ... the authority which such of their old men as had the reputation of wizards, or Obeah-men, possessed over [slaves], was sometimes very successfully employed in keeping them in subordination to their chiefs'.<sup>78</sup> In fact, Long was looking back to 1760, trying to explain the role of such 'wizards' in the most extensive slave revolt in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean.

In 1760 Tacky's Rebellion, as it came to be called, threatened British control of the island for the first time since the Maroon wars of the 1730s.<sup>79</sup> Over 1,000 people were involved and they managed to kill 60 whites and destroy thousands of pounds worth of property while continuing in revolt for months.<sup>80</sup> Between three and four hundred black men and women were killed or committed suicide during the war and the reprisals that followed.<sup>81</sup> Tacky, an enslaved African from the Gold Coast led the most extensive and well-coordinated slave revolt in the eighteenth-century British Caribbean, with obeah men as his closest counsellors. Tacky and his co-conspirators

called upon the shamen to use their charms to protect them from bullets and to administer binding loyalty oaths. Significantly, the oaths were made up of a concoction of blood, rum and *grave dirt*.<sup>82</sup> The rebellion ultimately failed, but its aftermath showed direct competition between different forms of sacred authority in stark relief.

In the wave of repressory executions that followed the rebellion, none were more impressive than the executions of the obeah men. Revealingly, colonial authorities felt they needed to resort to more awesome displays than they normally projected. In a report to the House of Commons, one witness described the scene this way:

At the place of execution he bid defiance to the Executioner, telling him that it was not in the Power of the White People to kill him; and the Negro Spectators were astonished when they saw him expire. On the other Obeah-men, various Experiments were made with Electrical Machines and Magic Lanthorns, which produced very little Effect; except on one who, after receiving many severe Shocks, acknowledged his Master's Obeah exceeded his own.<sup>83</sup>

The government hoped to overawe the shamen and their adherents with the latest technologies but most of the displays were less impressive than desired. Perhaps some slaves had witnessed them before as entertainments. In Antigua, experimenters put on exhibitions of 'the newly-discovered electric fire' as early as 1753. In one of them, 'A Flash of Lightning [was] made to strike a small House, and dart towards a little Lady sitting on a Chair, who will, notwithstanding, be preserved from being hurt; whilst the Image of a Negro standing by, and seeming to be further out of Danger, will be remarkably affected by it.'<sup>84</sup> There is every reason to believe that the more wealthy and worldly masters of Jamaica were treated to similar displays of scientific wizardry.<sup>85</sup> In any case, the amusing sight of lightning striking the 'image of negro' had progressed by 1760 to the 'severe' and no doubt excruciating electric shocks given to Tacky's obeah men.<sup>86</sup>

Jamaican masters could not abide sources of authority they did not wholly control: after Tacky's Rebellion, Jamaican law punished by death, imprisonment or exile 'any Negro who shall pretend to any Supernatural Power'.<sup>87</sup> The aggressive prosecution of obeah practitioners remained a preeminent concern in the slave court trials of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Whites both believed and doubted the efficacy of obeah. They continued to regard it as 'superstition', but of a peculiarly threatening kind. Because black men and women believed in its power, they could fall into despair and die if they thought they had been bewitched. Obeah practitioners were also expert poisoners and could settle disputes by murder when they chose to do so. More importantly, from the standpoint of

the plantocracy, obeah could motivate the enslaved to direct political action. In 1784 Judge John Grant rejected a master's appeal to stop the transportation of a convicted obeah man. 'If granted in this instance', warned the judge, 'application with equal reason might be made, while a rebellion might be raging throughout the country.' Clearly, the judge was primarily concerned about obeah's political potential, but in his notes on the case he defined obeah as 'The pretended exercise of witchcraft or sorcery, a crime which the new negroes bring with them from Africa, and which does infinite mischief among their fellow slaves.'<sup>88</sup> Such ambivalence toward obeah characterized the colonial state's persecution of its practitioners through to the end of slavery and beyond. But as long as people believed in its power, its practice would have to be punished. The consolidated slave law passed in 1823 clarified the real issue at stake: 'Obeah practised with intention to excite rebellion, or endangering the life or health of a slave, shall be punished at the discretion of the court.'<sup>89</sup> Thus, the ban on obeah was a ban on alternative authority and social power.

The operation of obeah in society is difficult to glean. As a highly illicit activity, obeah was almost always practiced in secret, and the whites who left written descriptions probably knew very little about it.<sup>90</sup> The surviving returns of obeah trials, however, do provide opportunities to ask fundamental questions about obeah's place in the social relations of slavery.<sup>91</sup> The Public Record Office in London preserves a nearly complete record of slave trial returns for the entire island from 1814–18. In these years the government prosecuted 85 obeah cases, 51 of which resulted in convictions. R.R. Madden claimed that, by the 1830s, obeah practitioners were generally old women. Yet less than two decades before Madden's sojourn on the island, only ten of 83 defendants (for whom gender can be determined) were women.<sup>92</sup> Moreover, women were acquitted of obeah charges in six of the ten cases. For men, the trend was reversed and they were found guilty 62 per cent of the time. Unlike earlier witch trials in Europe and North America, neither women's autonomy nor the intersection between the supernatural and the sexual seem to have been a significant concern – at least not for the colonial government.<sup>93</sup>

The most interesting question and puzzling problem presented by the returns is about the ages of the accused and convicted. Contemporary reports and subsequent scholarship have stressed that those most commonly accused of practicing obeah were aged Africans. 'The oldest and most crafty are those who usually attract the greatest Devotion and Confidence', Stephen Fuller reported to the House of Commons, 'those whose hoary heads' and a 'peculiarly harsh and diabolic' appearance 'qualified them for successful Imposition upon the weak and credulous'.<sup>94</sup> Following Fuller, Orlando Patterson maintained that 'People accused of obeah were in the

great majority of cases poor, abused, uncared for, often sick with yaws, and isolated from other slaves. They were also usually old people or Africans'.<sup>95</sup> Similarly, Robert Dirks noted 'the tendency for witch hunters to persecute only outcasts or anyone alienated from the mainstream'.<sup>96</sup> Yet the trial returns hint at other interpretations.

TABLE 1  
OBEAH CASES BY GENDER (JAMAICA, 1814–18)

	Total Cases	Acquittals	Convictions	% of Total
All Cases	85	34	51	100.0%
Men	73	28	45	85.9%
Women	10	4	6	11.8%
Gender Unknown	2	-	2	2.4%

TABLE 2  
OBEAH CASES BY SENTENCE (JAMAICA, 1814–18)

	Men	Women	Gender Unknown	Total Number	% of Total/ *of Convictions
All Cases	73	10	2	85	100%
Acquittals	28	6	-	34	40%
Convictions	45	4	2	51	60%
Executions	8	1	-	9	*18%
Transportations	33	3	2	38	*75%
Workhouse	4	0	-	4	*8%

*Source:* PRO, CO 137/147

When the slave courts condemned the guilty to death or transportation, they were required to pay compensation to their owners.<sup>97</sup> Specific values were partly determined by the loss of productive labour that masters would suffer, and so corresponded to the enslaved's age, health and ability to work. The trial returns for 1814–18 record the values for 13 convicted obeah practitioners, 11 men and two women.<sup>98</sup> Unfortunately, the returns did not always record the amounts paid out for each, so the sample is admittedly too small to draw firm conclusions.<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, the values unsettle the assumption that old and outcast slaves were the primary targets of the witch hunts. The compensation scale progressed from £15 to £100. The mean average value for the condemned men and women was £71, £75 between the two women. At the upper limit there were four men valued at £100,

while there was only one clearly 'superannuated' man claiming the minimum, £15, for his owner. Three people were valued at £75–80, while only one was valued at £40. Rather than pursuing the old and afflicted most zealously, the slave regime seems to have had the most success prosecuting vigorous men and women, who were also the most likely to wield material and social power.

Of course, this only raises further questions about the witch-hunts. Do the compensations only reflect the influence of planters trying to get maximum value for their confiscated property? Did the highest values go to the most influential planters? Perhaps older obeah practitioners were craftier and harder to convict. Maybe the younger practitioners were more prominent among the enslaved (and therefore more threatening), more public, and so more urgently prosecuted. After all, it should not be a surprise to discover that the plantocracy went after potential rebels who combined social and spiritual power more aggressively than the social outcasts, whom slaves may indeed have identified as the cause of their misfortunes.

Most of these queries and possibilities highlight the connection between obeah and other forms of social power in slave society. For instance, slave-drivers were also, at times, shamen, witches and adjudicators. Plantation attorneys and overseers commanded the right to appoint drivers and headmen to subdue the enslaved. These (nearly always men) acted as foremen on the plantation, enforcing labour discipline and implementing the work regime. As such, they received special privileges and comforts from their masters. They were granted more freedom of movement around and between the plantations; they lived in larger houses or cabins; they were allotted more land for cultivating provisions and more food from plantation stores; some were even allowed to carry guns for hunting and policing in clear violation of Jamaican slave codes.<sup>100</sup> Though the drivers ultimately served at their masters' pleasure, they also had to find convincing ways to exert their authority over their fellow slaves. So, as Robert L. Paquette has observed, they 'often wore several hats, whether as religious authorities or artisans', and they held a preminent status as communicators of useful knowledge across distance and social class.<sup>101</sup>

To enhance their eminence drivers presided over unsanctioned judiciaries. John Stewart was one of the few whites to witness an independent court, set up and maintained by and for the enslaved. 'On many estates', he observed,

the headmen erect themselves into a sort of bench of justice, which sits and decides, privately, and without the knowledge of whites, on all disputes and complaints of their fellow slaves. The sentences of this court are frequently severe ... they consist in pecuniary fines, which often exceed the means of the party.

Quite often, the means of determining guilt or innocence involved trial by ordeal, or spiritual divination via the techniques of obeah.<sup>102</sup>

Illicit court was just one space where obeah united sacred and social power. Drivers also recommended itinerant *Christian* ministers to white authority. Testifying before the House of Lords in 1832, planter William Shand recollected 'a chief man upon an estate coming to me (on Norris Estate, in the parish of St David's); he applied for permission [*to preach*] for a man who was a stranger to me, and I was not inclined to think favourably of his being allowed to come there and read prayers to the negroes'. As it turned out, one shaman was vouching for another. Three months later, 'The negroes charged this Driver with practising obeah'. Shand recalled that his slaves claimed to have suffered great injuries by the driver's sorcery 'and that he had been the occasion of the loss of many children on the estate'. Apparently, the driver had also bragged to them that he had caused 'the death of the former manager of that estate, Mr. Grant'.<sup>103</sup> On the evidence of the slaves, the man was tried, convicted and executed.

Inevitably, many headmen used their authority for personal and anti-social ends. At least many slaves assumed they did. On Trouthall Estate in 1809, Johana, an enslaved woman who had lost three children to putrid sore throats in quick succession, accused the second driver, Napier, of practicing obeah. Napier had been pursuing Johana's attention. She spurned him, and now she knew Napier was conjuring his revenge.<sup>104</sup> Without proof that could lead to a conviction in court, the plantation managers decided only to confine Napier for several months and then send him back to work.<sup>105</sup> Perhaps Johana suspected Napier came to his station as driver through occult means in the first place. Such a belief would be consistent with the conclusions of leading anthropologists and historians of African witchcraft. As Ralph Austen notes:

The African conception of the witch is tied to various forms of belief in a world where the apparent production of new wealth depends upon appropriating the scarce reproductive resources of others while collaborating with an arbitrary and destructive external power.<sup>106</sup>

Witchcraft accusations have also functioned as a levelling discourse that protected community harmony from prolific accumulators of wealth.<sup>107</sup> As Patterson found: 'Obeah accusations were also made against people who either threatened to be too successful or were the source of much anxiety.'<sup>108</sup>

People who used obeah for selfish ends, especially drivers who 'collaborated' with 'arbitrary and destructive' white power, probably drew more frequent witchcraft accusations from the enslaved than did common folk. As a potential threat to enslaved communal equilibrium on the one hand, and as a subversive and potentially insurrectionary force on the other,

Jamaican obeah exemplifies Peter Geschiere's supple description of witchcraft as both 'a resource for the powerful and also a weapon for weak against new inequalities'.<sup>109</sup> For obeah certainly emboldened the enslaved to resist the supremacy of their masters, and allowed blacks more generally to believe they could challenge whites.

Describing the case of Plato, a notorious Westmoreland outlaw, Matthew Lewis remarked in his typically droll manner that, 'besides his acknowledged courage, he was a professor of Obi, and had threatened that whoever dared to lay a finger upon him should suffer spiritual torments, as well as be physically shot through the head'.<sup>110</sup> In this case the spiritual threat was perhaps more effective than the material. Plato was captured, tried and executed but,

He died most heroically; kept up the terrors of his imposture to his last moment; told the magistrates, who condemned him, that his death should be revenged by a storm, which would lay waste the whole island, that year; and, when his negro gaoler was binding him to the stake at which he was destined to suffer, he assured him that he should not live long to triumph in his death, for that he had taken good care to Obeah him before quitting the prison. It certainly did happen, strangely enough, that, before the year was over, the most violent storm took place ever known in Jamaica; and as to the gaoler, his imagination was so forcibly struck by the threats of the dying man, that, although every care was taken of him, the power of medicine exhausted, and even a voyage to America undertaken, in hopes that a change of scene might change the course of his ideas, still, from the moment of Plato's death, he gradually pined and withered away, and finally expired before the completion of the twelvemonth.<sup>111</sup>

In a world where violent storms were always on their way, and where mortal sickness was always on the hunt for a weakened immune system, the awe of sacred authority was easily confirmed by events.

As long as the spiritual power of obeah was credible, black men and women wielded it to combat the worldly power of the whites. In a report to his cadre back home, John Shipman, the Kingston district chairman for the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, described a fascinating encounter between an overseer and a free black man armed with an obeah charm. One night, about midnight, the overseer heard someone digging not far from his house. When he looked out the window he saw a man whom he recognized digging a hole and 'depositing something which he knew to be an Obiah-Spell'. The overseer said nothing at the time, but the next morning 'he sent for the person who had done it and opened the hole and took out the deposit (intimating that something extraordinary had informed him of it) and found

it to consist of a Bottle filled, I believe, with rain water, and some feathers and cat's teeth'. As Shipman put it, 'This Gentleman got to understand that it was intended to remove him from office, by death of course.' The overseer harangued the man, 'informing him that he could *Hang* him for what he had done', but then let him go, 'charging him to escape to America or some other place'.<sup>112</sup>

Missionaries like Shipman, who arrived in Jamaica in the latter decades of the eighteenth century would emphasize the spiritual harm caused by 'communication with evil spirits' and with 'the Devil', similar to the concerns of prosecutors in seventeenth-century European and American witchcraft trials. Jamaica's colonial government was more concerned with different products of the supernatural imagination, particularly discourses which undercut the ability of the plantocracy to harness the dead to its own authority. Because obeah drew its gravest authority from its relationship to spirits and death, the prohibition amounted to a strategy to limit the sacred authority slaves derived from the spirits of the dead, while maximizing the power of the colonial government to use the dead as an element of social control.

Though different species of sacred authority were often socially opposed, there was considerable cultural borrowing and appropriation between masters and slaves. Each appropriated from the other symbolic practices that carried social and spiritual power; the use of powerful cultural categories and symbols did not necessarily correspond to their distinct and originary uses in Africa or Europe, even when they were put to distinct and irreconcilable purposes by blacks and whites.

Slaves and their overlords wielded intersecting and competing forms of authority that revolved around relationships to the dead. Indeed, masters put what they considered to be distinctly 'African' divining techniques into practice for their own benefit. In the first published description of an 'obeah' oath in 1740, Charles Leslie claimed that Africans in Jamaica administered them at the behest of their masters.

When any Thing about a Plantation is missing, they have a solemn Kind of Oath which the oldest Negroe always administers, and which by them is accounted so sacred, that *except [when] they have the express Command of their Master or Overseer, they never go about it,* and then they go very solemnly to Work. They range themselves in that Spot of Ground which is appropriate for the Negroe's Burying-place, and one of them opens a Grave. He who acts the Priest take a little of the Earth, and puts into every one of their Mouths; they tell, that if any has been guilty, their Belly swells and occasions their Death.<sup>113</sup> [emphasis added]

The utilization of such methods by whites extended beyond Jamaica. In Antigua, one early nineteenth-century English Methodist complained that 'Among the upper classes of those called white people, excepting a few that had been educated in Europe, there was great ignorance and superstition.' They applied to fortune-tellers and, worse yet, the pious Methodist also accused them of 'sprinkling grave-dirt & mixing it for the people about the house to drink' to discover the source of 'every trivial loss'.<sup>114</sup>

This grave-dirt is procured by sending a piece of money which we call a dog\*, by some faithful hand to the grave, over which the person prays the dead not to offend; and tells of the loss that has happened in the family, and that in order to discover the offender they are going to give all round a drink of this dirt mix'd thin enough with water to be drank. They pray that in three days the guilty person may be swell'd to an enormous size, & innocent preserved in perfect health. (\* I forgot to mention that this piece of money is left upon the grave to pay for the dirt that is taken away).<sup>115</sup>

Some whites clearly held African supernatural power in high regard and sought to extend their own authority over the enslaved by co-opting it.

Similarly, blacks in Jamaica appropriated sacred symbolic power from whites. Once Christianity took hold in the early nineteenth century, the Bible came to replace grave dirt in theft investigation rites. R.R. Madden told how 'To find out the person who has committed a theft, all parties are called upon to open a Bible, 10th chapter of Kings.'

They then place a key between the leaves, and tie it in the closed book with a slender thread; the key is held between the tips of the two second fingers; the book is then struck after a portion of the 50th psalm has been read, and if the person is present who committed the theft, the key will remain in the hand of the holder, and the book will fall to the ground.<sup>116</sup>

Long before the influence of Christianity, Africans and their descendants appear to have incorporated the sacred signs of Europeans into their own cosmologies. To take just one curious example, the number nine became a spiritually significant sign among blacks. In early modern Europe the number nine played an iconic role in magic ceremonies that rendered the dead harmless and prevented the return of ghosts.<sup>117</sup> Yet 'nine' appears prominently in the first widely published and disseminated description of obeah in the English language. 'In magic spells, in Obia, all the sons of sable Afric trust: Ye sacred Nine!' chirped James Grainger in *The Sugar Cane*.<sup>118</sup> We could assume that Grainger was simply transposing a familiar sign to an unfamiliar context if the number did not show up so often in

conjunction with spiritual power. 'The Negroes wear the teeth of wild cats, and eat of their flesh, as a charm for long life', Edward Long contended, because they supposedly held the 'opinion that a cat has nine lives. Thus, by assimilation of the cat's flesh and juices into their own, they imagine they can ensure longevity, and power of sustaining great fatigues'.<sup>119</sup> John Shipman complained that a black religious teacher declared 'that the Lord had revealed it to him that he should fall *nine times into sin* ... and then be restored' [original emphasis].<sup>120</sup> And by the early twentieth century the 'nine nights' wake was a fundamental part of country funeral ceremonies since, according to Mary Beckwith, people believed that 'for nine nights after death the ghost rises out of the grave and returns to its familiar haunts'.<sup>121</sup> It is unlikely that historians will ever have enough information to trace the social-historical genealogy of the 'sacred nine' in Jamaica, but the transformation of its meanings over time and across social difference suggest that its significance lies less in its cultural 'origin' than in its practical use – the persistence of the 'sacred nine' as an index of relationships to death and spirit.

In Jamaican slave society the cultural forms that sacred authority took underwent a continual process of convergence and re-definition as they resonated with the practical demands of domination on the one side, and of survival struggles within slavery on the other. They were *Creole* and *creolizing*. Thus the way that people appropriated the dead for political authority in Jamaica corroborates anthropologist Grey Gundaker's general description of creolization as a process.

During creolization, participants reconfigure relationships among intersecting, interfering, and often hierarchical cultural systems to fit new circumstances. When Africans from different ethnic groups encountered each other and the representative of metropolitan, colonial powers on the plantations, they often made the most of similarities and redundancies among cultural systems. At the same time they also selectively loosed components from their moorings in these systems, treating them as resources to draw on as situations warranted.<sup>122</sup>

The general situation underlying the process of adaptation, creolization and appropriation in Jamaica was a world in which the dead were an active social presence, and a society in which domination, dissent and the threat of incredible violence plagued every interaction.

If, as many anthropologists have come to believe, authority always has a transcendent, that is, a *sacred* dimension, then the terror tactics of Jamaican rulers only constitute a particular historical example of a more general human phenomenon.<sup>123</sup> The Jamaican plantocracy tried to place its own authority above human contestation by alternately appropriating and censoring the

spiritual authority of the enslaved. In Jamaican slave society, as elsewhere, the government ruled and the oppressed resisted by refusing the distinction between civic and spiritual worlds. Perhaps the most important aspect of the Jamaican context was an awareness that the dead populated the world, and could be conscripted for political use. Those who would realize their social objectives were ever cognizant that 'What gives us most horror is death, and in the feeling of the sacred, existence is a close relative of death: as if in a dream, the contents of a coffin drew us towards it.'<sup>124</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Bryan Edwards, *The History of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 3 Vols. (London: T. Miller, 1801), Vol.III, p.36.
2. Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: ReBurial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), pp.27–8.
3. As Michael Taussig explained in another colonial context: 'The colonized space of death has a colonizing function, maintaining the hegemony or cultural stability of norms and desires that facilitate the way the rulers ruled in the land of the living. Yet the space of death is notoriously conflict-ridden and contradictory; a privileged domain of metamorphosis, the space par excellence for uncertainty and terror to stun permanently, yet also revive and empower with new life.' Taussig, *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.374. To explore similar themes (in another Caribbean context) from the perspective of literary ethnography, see Joan Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).
4. Testimony of Henry Coor, 16 Feb. 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol.82, Reports and Papers, Slave Trade, ed. Sheila Lambert (Delaware: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1975), p.74.
5. Testimony of Dr Harrison, MD, 12 Feb. 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, p.50.
6. Testimony of William Fitzmaurice, 9 March 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, pp.230–1.
7. Testimony of Mr Thomas Clapperson, 8 March 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, p.213. Also see other examples in Lorna McDaniel, 'The Flying Africans', *New West Indian Guide*, 64, 1–2 (1990), pp.28–40, esp. pp.32–3; William D. Piersen, 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs: Fear, Depression, and Religious Faith as Causes of Suicide Among New Slaves', *Journal of Negro History*, LXII (1977), pp.151, 154–5; Michael Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp.114–34; Philip Morgan, *Slave Counterpoint: Black Culture in the Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake & Lowcountry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), pp.641–2.
8. Testimony of Mr Mark Cook, 5 March 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, p.197.
9. The query may seem ridiculous in hindsight, but the committee asked this question while pro-slavery ideologues and apologists were commonly arguing that black slaves preferred living under the English 'rule of law' to living under the 'arbitrary and absolute' authority of African rulers. See for example the testimony of John Wedderburn, 27 years a planter in Jamaica: 'In their own country the stronger party, who are the party of most consequence,

- often do as they think proper to the weaker party, whether it is attended by justice or not.' 19 March 1790, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.72, p.79; see also Bryan Edwards, *History of the British West Indies*, 5 Vols. (London: T. Miller, 1819), Vol.II, pp.81–3.
10. Testimony of Lt. Baker Davidson, 25 Feb. 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, p.185.
  11. Richard Ligon, *A True and Exact History of the Island of Barbadoes, 1647–1650* (1657; London: Frank Cass, 1976), p.17.
  12. C.G.A. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, ed. Johann Jakob Bossard, trans. Arnold R. Highfield and Vladimir Barac (1770; Ann Arbor: Karona Publishers, 1987), p.246.
  13. Moreau de St. Mery cited in Piersen, 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs', p.154; see also Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, pp.247–8.
  14. Piersen, 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs', p.154; Gwendolyn Midlo Hall, *Social Control in Slave Plantation Societies: A Comparison of St. Domingue and Cuba* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), p.21.
  15. Anon., *The Importance of JA to GBr. Considered* (London: A. Dodd, 1741), cited in Orlando Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (1967; Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1969), p.196.
  16. 'John Venn to Bishop Sherlock', 15 June 1751, f.47, Vol.XVIII, Jamaica, 1740-undated, The Fulham Papers, Lambeth Palace Library, London.
  17. John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica, with Remarks on the Moral and Physical Condition of the Slaves, and on the Abolition of Slavery in the Colonies* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1823), p.281. Following the abolition of Britain's transatlantic slave-trade in 1807, and the consequent growth of the Creole population the belief of a return to Africa had diminished currency.
  18. Fear of post-mortem mutilation terrorized common Londoners as much, or more, than the gallows itself. See Peter Linebaugh, 'The Tyburn Riots Against the Surgeons', in Douglas Hay *et al.* (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree: Crime and Society in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Pantheon, 1975); and Frank McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p.229. In England, before the eighteenth century, suicide was widely thought to be caused by diabolic possession directly attributed to Satan and his demons. This immediate concern with evil forces yielded to anxieties about the preservation of secular and divine authority. By the eighteenth century, according to Frank McLynn, the self-murderer was abominable because 'he offended against the king, whose interests dictated the preservation of his own subjects', and because 'he blasphemed against the law of God', usurping the Lord's authority over life and death. 'The reign of George III saw the decisive abandonment of the belief that suicide was diabolically inspired. Put simply, the eighteenth century saw the secularization of the crime of suicide'. See McLynn, *Crime and Punishment*, pp.50, 54. For Anglo-Atlantic slave owners, however, it seems clear that suicide was conceived very early as a secular crime which ought to be deterred with spiritual punishments.
  19. Piersen, 'White Cannibals, Black Martyrs', p.154–5; see also 'Letters of Philip Quaque', reprinted in Philip D. Curtin (ed.), *Africa Remembered: Narratives by West Africans from the Era of the Slave Trade* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1967), pp.128–9; see also the diary of Antera Duke, a slave-trading chief in the eighteenth-century Bight of Biafra, in Daryll C. Forde (ed.), *Efik Traders of Old Calabar* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1956).
  20. Sir Hans Sloane, *A Voyage to the Islands of Madera, Barbados, Neives, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, 2 Vols. (London: Printed for the British Museum, 1707–25), Vol.I, p.lvii.
  21. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 18 May 1750, quoted in Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p.39.
  22. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 2 October 1750, quoted in Craton, *Testing the Chains*, p.39.
  23. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 9 October 1752, quoted in Douglas Hall, *In Miserable Slavery: Thomas Thistlewood in Jamaica, 1750–86* (London: Macmillan, 1989), p.30.
  24. Philip Wright, *Lady Nugent's Journal of her Residence in Jamaica from 1801 to 1805*

- (Kingston: Institute of Jamaica, 1966), p.165. The man was one of two executed for 'rebellious conspiracy'.
25. Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West India Planter kept during a Residence in the Island of Jamaica* (London: John Murray, 1834), pp.181–2. Though the plantocracy made terrifying examples of Dunbar's driver and his conspirators, the event continued to reverberate among the enslaved in way that the plantocracy had not intended. 'The stranger-youths, two of Dunbar's negroes, and the driver, were tried, confessed the crime, and were all executed; the head of the latter being fixed upon a pole *in terrorem*. But while the offenders were still in prison, the overseer upon a neighboring property had occasion to find fault in the field with a woman belonging to a gang hired to perform some particular work; upon which she flew upon him with the greatest fury, grasped him by the throat, cried to her fellow—"Come here! come here! Let's Dunbar him!" and through their strength and the suddenness of her attack had nearly accomplished her purpose before his own slaves could come to his assistance. This woman was also executed.' *Ibid.*, pp.182–3.
  26. As Katherine Verdery has noted: 'A body's materiality can be critical to its symbolic efficacy: unlike notions such as "patriotism" or "civil society", for instance, a corpse can be moved around, displayed, and strategically located in specific places. Bodies have the advantage of concreteness that nonetheless transcends time, making past immediately present.' Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, p.27.
  27. 'Returns of Slave Trials', Saint Elizabeth, 16 March 1816, p.55, CO 137/147, Public Records Office (PRO), Kew, London.
  28. It would certainly be fair to ask, as did contemporary reformers in Europe, if such displays did not lose their evocative power over time. In 1791, Henry Coor testified before the House of Commons that 'at my first coming to the island, a common flogging of a Negro would have put me in a tremble, and disordered me so that I did not feel myself right again generally the remaining part of the day, but by degrees and custom it became so habitual, that I thought no more of seeing a Black man's head cut off, than I should now think of a butcher cutting off the head of his calf'. Testimony of Henry Coor, *House of Commons Sessional Papers of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol.82, p.99.
  29. Folke Strom, *On the Sacral Origins of the Germanic Death Penalties* (Lund: Hakan Ohlssons Boktryckeri, 1942); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1979), pp.32–69; Graeme Newman, *The Punishment Response* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1978), pp.27–51; and Mitchell B. Merback, *The Thief, the Cross and the Wheel: Pain and the Spectacle of Punishment in Medieval and Renaissance Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).
  30. Newman, *The Punishment Response*, pp.44, 46.
  31. Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.57.
  32. Leon Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law and its Administration from 1750, Volume I, The Movement for Reform, 1750–1833* (New York: Macmillan, 1948), pp.213–14.
  33. Douglas Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in Hay *et al.* (eds.), *Albion's Fatal Tree*, pp.28–9.
  34. *Ibid.*, p.27.
  35. According to Douglas Hay, it is possible that by the eighteenth century, 'the secular sermons of the criminal law had become more important than those of the church', *ibid.*, p.29.
  36. Radzinowicz, *A History of English Criminal Law*, pp.178–81.
  37. V.A.C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p.80.
  38. Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering*, p.57.
  39. Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', pp.40–9.
  40. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree*, p.83.
  41. Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', p.63.
  42. Cited in David Barry Gaspar, 'With a Rod of Iron: Barbados Slave Laws as a Model for Jamaica, South Carolina, and Antigua, 1661–1697', in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora* (1999; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), p.346.

43. David Barry Gaspar, "'Rigid and Inclement': Origins of the Jamaica Slave Laws of the Seventeenth Century", in Christopher L. Tomlins and Bruce H. Mann (eds.), *The Many Legalities of Early America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp.78–96. In the code of 1696, passed during a particularly unstable period, Jamaica diluted provisions for the protection of slaves included in the 1664 code (copied from the 1661 Barbadian code) and increased the severity of the police regulations, 'even to a degree of inhumanity', as Long admitted. Gaspar, 'Rigid and Inclement', p.95; for the classic analysis of Caribbean slave law, see Elsa V. Goveia, 'The West Indian Slave Laws of the Eighteenth Century', in Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy* (New York: The New Press, 1991), pp.346–62.
44. Long quoted in Gaspar, 'Rigid and Inclement', p.95.
45. Diana Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica', *Journal of Social History*, 34, 4 (2001), pp.923–54, quote on p.923.
46. The first tribunals established in 1664 consisted of one justice of the peace and two 'sufficient Neighbors' who adjudicated capital cases and passed sentences to be carried out by slave owners. See Gaspar, 'Rigid and Inclement', p.83. The number of judges was increased in 1696.
47. Diana Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves', pp.927, 950n; St Thomas in the Vale, Vestry Minutes, 1789–1802, Archives of Jamaica, Local Government 2/1, 1.
48. William Beckford, *Remarks Upon the Situation of the Negroes in Jamaica* (London: Egerton, 1788), p.93.
49. Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves', p.939–40. Paton argues convincingly that the extreme punishments meted out for committing violence against whites expanded upon the English legal principle of 'petit treason'. 'Under this theory, murder by a subordinate—a wife, child, servant, or apprentice—of the person who had legitimate authority over him or her—husband, father, or master—was considered treasonous within the household, a crime analogous to treason against the state. Jamaican lawmakers expanded this idea so that all white people had legitimate authority over all slaves. A violent act by a slave against a white person could never be just that; it always carried with it the implicit threat of slave rebellion and the overthrow of white power.' *Ibid.*, p.931. On punishments for petty treason in England, see McLynn, *Crime and Punishment in Eighteenth-Century England*, pp.121–4.
50. Diary of Thistlewood, 10 October 1766, quoted in Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, p.142.
51. 'Testimony of Capt. Thomas Lloyd', 25 Feb. 1791, *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.82, p.147.
52. St Thomas in the Vale, Vestry Minutes, 1789–1802, Local Government 2/1, 1, p.168, Archives of Jamaica.
53. Roger Norman Buckley, *The British Army in the West Indies: Society and the Military in the Revolutionary Age* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp.203–47.
54. 'Petition from the Carpenter's Mountains, 14 May 1731', *Journals of the Jamaican House of Assembly*, 3 (Jamaica: Printed by A. Aikman, 1745), p.8. It is not known whether the Assembly acceded to the petitioner's request.
55. 'Thomas Murray to WMMS', Montego Bay, 3 April 1832, Box 131, FBN 9, No.446, West Indies General Correspondence, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society Archives (WMMS), School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
56. Paton, 'Punishment, Crime, and the Bodies of Slaves', p.940.
57. *Ibid.*, p.942.
58. Lewis, *Journal of a West India Planter*, p.182.
59. John Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader, 1750–1754, With Newton's Thoughts upon the African Slave Trade*, ed. Bernard Martin and Mark Spurrell (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), p.55.
60. Newton, *The Journal of a Slave Trader*, p.56.
61. Quoted in Jerome S. Handler, 'Slave Medicine and Obeah in Barbados, circa 1650 to 1834', *New West Indian Guide*, 74, 1–2 (2000), p.59.
62. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 25 April 1753, quoted in Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, p.56.
63. Diary of Thomas Thistlewood, 6 Jan. 1754, quoted in *ibid.*, p.61.
64. See Jerome S. Handler and Kenneth M. Bilby, 'On the Early Use and Origin of the Term

- "Obeah" in Barbados and the Anglophone Caribbean', *Slavery and Abolition*, 22, 2 (Aug. 2001), pp.87–100.
65. *Ibid.*, pp.93–4.
66. *Ibid.*, pp.90–2; see also Douglas Chambers, "'My Own Nation": Igbo Exiles in the Diaspora', *Slavery and Abolition*, 18, 1 (1997), pp.72–97, although Chambers overstates the degree to which obeah can be described as an 'Igbo' practice.
67. *Ibid.*, p.92.
68. *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.69, p.216.
69. *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.69, p.217; R.R. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence in the West Indies*, 2 Vols. (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea and Blanchard, 1835), Vol.II, p.69.
70. Robert Farris Thompson and Joseph Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun: Kongo Art in Two Worlds* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1981), p.37.
71. Alexander Barclay, *A Practical View of the Present State of Slavery in The West Indies... containing more particularly an account of the Actual Condition of the Negroes in Jamaica ...* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1826) pp.190–1.
72. Oldendorp, *History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren*, p.198.
73. The open question of how obeah practitioners trained apprentices in their arts remains crucial to a full understanding of how shamanism developed in the West Indies, Jerome Handler (personal communication).
74. O. Nigel Bolland, 'Creolisation and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 44, 1-2 (1998), p.22, reprinted from Alistair Hennessy (ed.), *Intellectuals in the Twentieth-Century Caribbean*, 2 Vols. (London: Macmillan, 1992), Vol.I, pp.50–79.
75. See Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia: Conflict and its Ritual Expression on British West Indian Slave Plantations* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1987), pp.152–3.
76. 'St. Ann Slave Court, 1787– 1814', 3 March 1794, 5 May 1799, MS 273, Institute of Jamaica.
77. Mindie Lazarus-Black, *Legitimate Acts and Illegal Encounters: Law and Society in Antigua and Barbuda* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp.46–7, 54.
78. Edward Long quoted in *The Proceedings of the Governor and Assembly of Jamaica, in regard to the Maroon Negroes ...* (London: J. Stockdale, 1796), p.xxvii.
79. For descriptions of the war and its aftermath, see Edward Long, *History of Jamaica*, 3 Vols. (1774; London: Frank Cass, 1970), Vol.II, pp.447–72; Bryan Edwards, *History of the West Indies*, Vol.II, pp.75–9; see also Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp.125–39; and Monica Schuler, 'Akan Slave Rebellions in the British Caribbean', in Beckles and Shepherd (eds.), *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy*, pp.373–86.
80. Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, p.271.
81. *Ibid.*
82. For more on grave dirt and oath-taking among Africans and their descendants, see Charles Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica* (Edinburgh: R. Fleming, 1740), p.324; Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol.II, pp.422–3; Kenneth Bilby, 'Swearing by the Past, Swearing to the Future: Sacred Oaths, Alliances, and Treaties among the Guianese and Jamaican Maroons', *Ethnohistory* 44 (Fall 1997), pp.655–89; see also Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia*, p.158.
83. *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.69, p.219.
84. 'For the Entertainment of the Curious, There is Now to be Exhibited at the House of Messr. Alleyne & Williams, in Newgate Street, and to be continued for a few Weeks; A Course of Experiments on the Newly-discovered Electric Fire ...', St. John's, 25 April 1753, in Douglas C. McMurtrie, *Early Printing on the Island of Antigua* (Evanston: Priv. Print, 1943). I thank James Delbourgo for bringing this reference to my attention.
85. As early as 1767 Thomas Thistlewood began to show his magic lantern to favoured slaves. Diary of Thistlewood, 14 September 1767, quoted in Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, p.160. Also, among the books Thistlewood received in a 1771 shipment was Benjamin Franklin's *Experiments and Observations on Electricity*, Hall, *In Miserable Slavery*, p.225. Though perhaps interest in electricity among planters began with Tacky's execution it is more likely that interest was early and ongoing.

86. This is, potentially, the first reference to the use of electricity for purposes of torture. A recent general history of torture maintains that 'The use of electricity is the signal contribution of the twentieth century to torture'. Brian Innes, *The History of Torture* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1998), p.144. The authoritative text on early science in the Caribbean also makes no mention of electricity's utility in the torture of slaves. See James E. McClellan III, *Colonialism and Science: Saint Domingue in the Old Regime* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992). If indeed, the history of punitive electrocution begins in the slave societies of the Caribbean, long before electricity's use for the 'betterment of mankind', it would seem to support the contention of Paul Gilroy (and many others before him) who rejects the 'mesmeric idea of history as progress', that slavery and terror were integral aspects of modernity rather than as its opposites. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. pp.53–4.
87. 'Copies of the Several Acts for the Regulation of Slaves, passed in the West India Islands', *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.67, p.111.
88. Helen Tunnicliff Caterall (ed.), *Judicial Cases concerning American Slavery and the Negro, Volume V, Cases from the Courts of States north of the Ohio and West of the Mississippi Rivers, Canada, and Jamaica* (Washington DC: Carnegie Institution, 1937), p.356.
89. The law is quoted in 'First Report of the Commissioners of Enquiry into the Administration of Criminal and Civil Justice in the West Indies, dated 29th June 1827', in *Irish University Press Series of British Parliamentary Papers: Colonies, West Indies*, 8 Vols. (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1968), Vol.III, p.381.
90. One plantation manager complained that obeah practitioners were extremely difficult to catch, that masters were only successful one in ten times. 'William Anderson to James Chisholme', Trouthall Estate, 5 Feb. 1810, MS 5466-112, Papers of William and James Chisholme, National Library of Scotland. I thank Roderick McDonald for providing me with his notes on this source.
91. 'Returns of Slave Trials', CO 137/147, PRO.
92. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence*, p.74.
93. Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (1987; New York: Vintage Books, 1989); Ralph A. Austen, 'The Moral Economy of Witchcraft: An Essay in Comparative History', in Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.), *Modernity and its Malcontents: Ritual and Power in Postcolonial Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp.99–103.
94. *House of Commons Sessional Papers*, Vol.69, p.216.
95. Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, p.193.
96. Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia*, p.156.
97. For a thorough analysis of compensation claims in another West Indian slave society, see David Barry Gaspar, "'To Bring Their Offending Slaves to Justice": Compensation and Slave Resistance in Antigua, 1669–1763', *Caribbean Quarterly*, 30, 3–4 (1984), pp.45–59.
98. CO 137/147, PRO, records 13 compensation values for convicted obeah practitioners: 100 = 4; 80 = 2; 75 = 1; 70 = 1; 67 = 1; 50 = 2; 40 = 1; 15 = 1 (11 male, 2 female [£70 and £80]); average value £71.
99. When no value was recorded it did not mean that no money was paid out. Most parishes simply did not list the compensation values in the general return, 'Returns of Slave Trials', CO 137/147, PRO.
100. Robert L. Paquette, 'The Drivers Shall Lead Them: Image and Reality in Slave Resistance', in Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger (eds.), *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), pp.32–3.
101. *Ibid.*, p.53.
102. Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica*, pp.262–3. For a broader discussion of such courts in the context of social hierarchies among the enslaved, see Robert Dirks, *The Black Saturnalia*, pp.140–4; see also Mindie Lazarus-Black, 'Slaves, Masters, and Magistrates: Law and the Politics of Resistance in the British Caribbean, 1736–1834', in Mindie Lazarus-Black and Susan F. Hirsh (eds.), *Contested States: Law, Hegemony and Resistance* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
103. Minutes of Evidence taken before the Select Committee of the House of Lords appointed to

- inquire into the Laws and Usages of the several West India Colonies in relation to the Slave Population, &c. &c. &c., 1831–32, House of Lords Record Office, London, p.220.
104. 'William Anderson to James Chisholme', Trouthall Estate, 13 April 1809, MS 5466–112, Papers of William and James Chisholme.
  105. 'William Anderson to James Chisholme', Trouthall Estate, 5 Feb. 1810, MS 5466-112, Papers of William and James Chisholme.
  106. Austen, 'The Moral Economy of Witchcraft', p.104.
  107. The literature on witchcraft as social sanction in Africa is too voluminous to recount here. For a recent comparative article see Austen, 'The Moral Economy of Witchcraft'.
  108. Patterson, *Sociology of Slavery*, p.194.
  109. Peter Geschiere, *The Modernity of Witchcraft: Politics and the Occult in Postcolonial Africa*, trans. Peter Geschiere and Janet Roitman (1995; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997), p.16. 'Healers are always highly ambivalent figures', notes Geschiere, 'they can only heal because they have killed', p.196. For a more narrowly pessimistic view see Austen, 'The Moral Economy of Witchcraft', p.105. 'It is difficult', argues Austen, 'to depict African witchcraft idioms as a weapon of African resistance. Their immediate moral targets are other Africans while they leave the European bases of power mystified to a point where they can only be avoided'.
  110. Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor*, p.91.
  111. *Ibid.*, p.94.
  112. John Shipman, 'Thoughts upon the Present State of Religion among the Negroes of Jamaica', 1820, Box 588, FBN 2: Nos.27–31, pp.12–13, Biographical, West Indies, WMS Special Series, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Archives, School of Oriental and African Studies, London.
  113. Leslie, *A New and Exact Account of Jamaica*, p.324.
  114. 'Anne Gilbert to Rev. Richard Park[?]', English Harbour, Antigua, 1 June 1804, Box 111, FBN 1, No.4, West Indies General Correspondence, WMS.
  115. *Ibid.*
  116. Madden, *A Twelvemonth's Residence*, p.70. Madden fails to disclose which portion of Psalm 50 was read in the ceremony but some parts of the passage suggest clear parallels with oath-taking ceremonies that featured grave dirt. For example, Psalm 50: 16–19 reads: 'But to the wicked God says: "What right have you to recite my statutes or take my covenant on your lips? For you hate discipline, and you cast my words behind you. You make friends with a thief when you see one, and you keep company with adulterers. You give your mouth free reign for evil and your tongue frames deceit.' Psalm 50: 22 must have resonated with their experiences as slaves. 'Mark this, then, you who forget God, or I will tear you apart, and there will be no one to deliver you.' *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments: New Revised Standard Version* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.574.
  117. Strom, *On the Sacral Origins of the Germanic Death Penalties*, p.222; Newman, *The Punishment Response*, pp.38–9.
  118. Grainger quoted in Alan Richardson, 'Romantic Voodoo: Obeah and British Culture, 1797–1807', in Margarite Fernandez Olmos and Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert (eds.), *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), p.174.
  119. Long, *History of Jamaica*, Vol.II, p.420. Leopard pelts, teeth and claws have also held spiritual significance in Kongo. See Thompson and Cornet, *The Four Moments of the Sun*, pp.31, 35–7.
  120. Shipman, 'Thoughts upon the Present State of Religion', p.43.
  121. Mary Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1929), pp.77–8.
  122. Grey Gundaker, *Signs of Diaspora, Diaspora of Signs: Literacies, Creolization, and Vernacular Practice in African America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.17.
  123. Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies*, p.37.
  124. Georges Bataille, 'Le sacre au XX siècle', excerpted in Michael Richardson, *Georges Bataille – Essential Writings* (London: Sage Publications, 1998), p.47.